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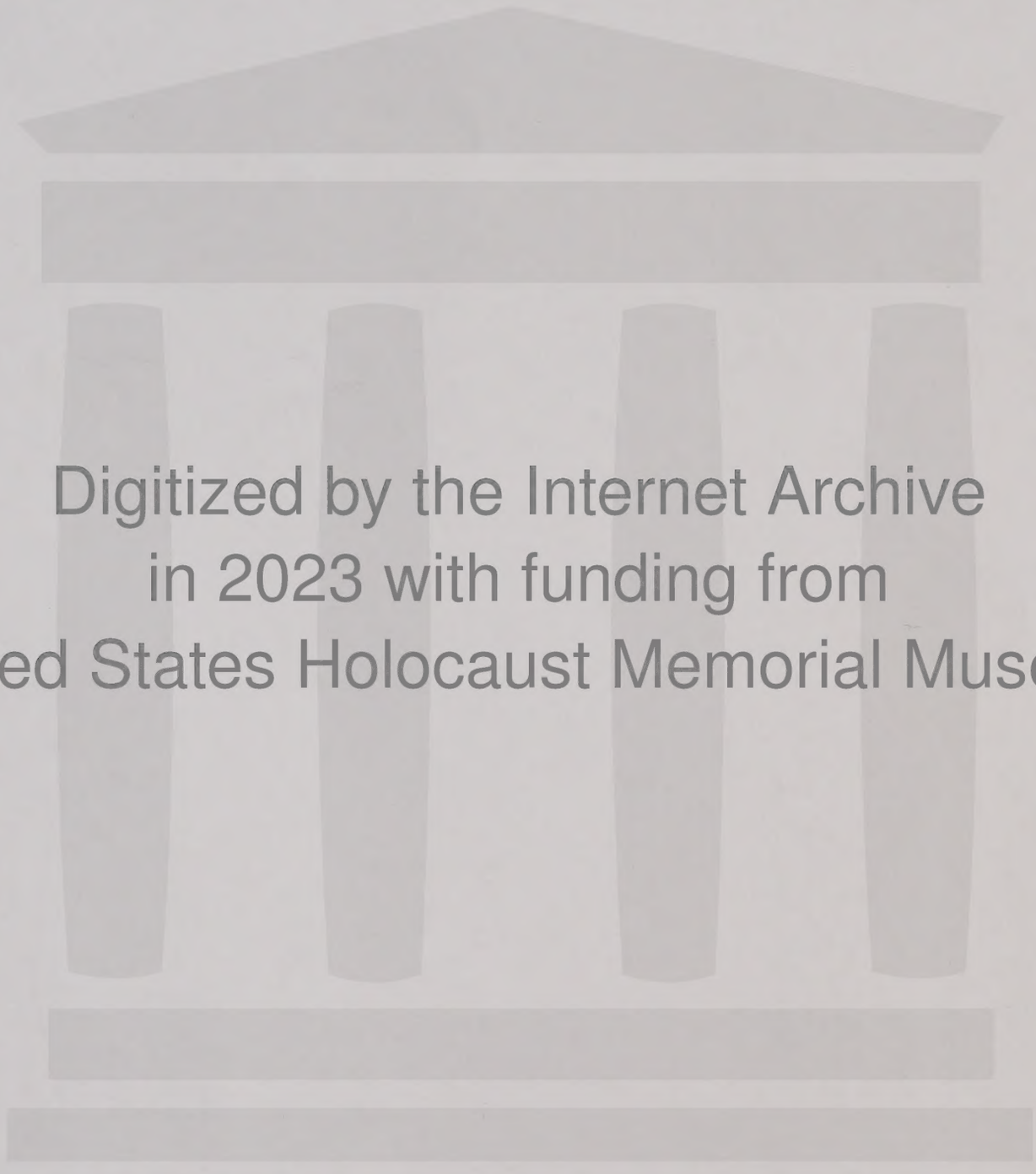

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VALEDICTION

A Memoir

By Irving Halperin

The battle at Guadalajara in March 1937 had spurred several young men from Chicago to volunteer for service with the Abraham Lincoln Brigade in Spain, and it was for the sendoff of these volunteers that my father had me accompany him to the Dearborn Street Station. That he wanted me to be there had to do with, I anticipated, his leftist political views. At the station a large gathering of Spanish Loyalist supporters were massed before a track gate. Several held up large signs reading "No Pasara´n!" Facing their supporters, the volunteers, wearing black berets, stood with their backs to the gate. From the

animation of the crowd, a passerby might have supposed that this was some sort of festive occasion. The volunteers appeared to be in high spirits, as though they were holiday bound.

I heard my father say under his breath, "So young . . ." It is true that the volunteers did not look much older than me, and I was only fifteen. Perhaps my father identified the volunteers with the anti-Czarist young revolutionary he had been in Russia. Of that time in his life I knew very little.

My father pushed his way from the rear of the crowd to a position near the gate. I followed him. Then he was shaking the hands of two volunteers. Clearly, he regarded them as heroes. Did he wonder how many would return from Spain—or return crippled?

Standing beside each other, my father and I were a study in contrasts. He was small, slender, alert, and his movements were quick, decisive. Already a head taller than him, lanky, ungainly, patently timid, I slouched to reduce the difference in our heights.

He did not introduce me to the two volunteers. Why not? Perhaps he thought that my six foot height would make them wonder why I wasn't going to Spain. Probably it would have pleased my father

had I said that if my age wasn't a deterrent, I would be a volunteer. But in his presence I habitually felt intimidated, judged, fearful. Anyway, why didn't he himself become a volunteer? After all, he was only thirty-nine—not too old to be a soldier. Well, recently I had overheard his saying to an acquaintance that he would fight in Spain, fight for freedom and justice there, were it not for his wife and two young sons. Because who would provide for them if he were to die on the battlefield?

Now the two volunteers turned and went toward some people nearby who had been waving at them. I glanced at my father's face as he watched the volunteers moving away. A sad, distant look appeared in his eyes, as though inwardly he was tracking a receding vision. Perhaps he was trying to picture what it would be like for these volunteers when they arrived in Spain and confronted the Fascists. At any rate, many years after his death in 1937, I read about an incident at the University of Salamanca when the great Miguel de Unamuno was its rector during the Spanish Civil War. On this occasion while he was addressing the faculty and student body, some Fascisti sitting at the back of the auditorium, intending to drown out Unamuno, kept shouting,

"Viva la meurte!" Viva death, a glorious death on the battlefield is what these emotional cripples hungered for. Continually interrupted by the shouting, Unamuno finally put aside his address and speaking directly to the audience said that in the short run thugs like those at the back of the auditorium might well win the war because they had the superior weaponry and military training. But, in the long run, he prophesied, knowledge and humane values would prevail over ignorance, over the cruelty and squalor of war.

If my father was alive now, after the Holocaust, after the wars in Asia, the Middle East, the Balkans and elsewhere, how would he react to Unamuno's prophecy? I would like to think he would be in agreement. But maybe not. Perhaps he would agree with Freud's notion that man's essential hostile nature dooms humankind to unending wars, genocide, barbarism . . . But this is to digress from the scene at the railroad station.

A voice blared over the public address system that the train for New York would be leaving in five minutes. At once the crowd closed in, surrounded the volunteers to form a protective escort. A flurry of embraces, arms upraised in a clenched fist salute, shouts of "No

Pasara´n!" The volunteers, arms still upraised, turned and passed through the gate. As though to accompany them, the crowd surged forward but was checked by uniformed personnel. Walking briskly alongside the tracks, the figures of the volunteers receded, disappeared. Soon there was the sound of train wheels turning. For a little while the crowd behind the gate lingered, then dispersed.

All the while, my father seemed to be staring at some point in space beyond the gate. His mouth trembled, as though silently he was repeating a vow. Then he said, grimly, "Let's go."

In the street outside the station a harsh wind slammed against store signs. As we made our way toward a parking lot, I waited for my father to say something about what we had witnessed. But he obviously was distracted. He may or may not have been musing on the volunteers' sendoff—characteristically, his moods were unpredictable if not volatile. Being in his presence sometimes was to fear the imminent explosion of a bomb.

* * *

From the station my father drove to the Logan Square neighborhood where his grocery store was located. An impatient

driver, he cursed and pounded the horn at slow vehicles. His shifting of gears was jerky. He would brake abruptly. Riding with him was an adventure.

From time to time he pressed a hand over his abdomen, as though to staunch some discomfort. Some weeks before I had first noticed this same gesture, and since then it had occurred frequently. From overhearing a conversation between my parents, I gathered that he had been experiencing persistent stomach pain. X-rays had not yielded any significant information. Further tests had been scheduled.

I had assumed that my father would drop me off at our apartment before he returned to the store, and then I would be free to join my neighborhood pals for a game of softball. To my disappointment, he said that he wanted me to do some unpacking and shelving of merchandise in the store. Perhaps this work actually needed to be done but more likely he was in a familiar frame of mind to teach me Responsibility. In his view, young people in America, unlike his impoverished existence as a youth in Russia, had it too easy.

Inside the store my mother was at the cash register and the clerks, Jim and Bobbie, were waiting on trade. My mother looked worn. She put in long store hours and then went home to do all the cooking and apartment cleaning. She was also available to relieve her husband for an hour or two when the burdens of the business lay too heavily on him. Then he would drive to a nearby park and sit on a bench, reading. On returning to the store he would look less grim and tense.

An experienced clerk, a savvy, tough, garishly sexy woman in her mid-thirties, Bobbie, in my memory, was the only one of father's employees ever to talk back to him with impunity. Somehow, she had his number, he did not intimidate her. When on occasion he sarcastically criticized her, she would sharply retort with a burst of profanity that silenced him. In any event, what ultimately mattered to my father is that the customers liked her and that she was, as far as he could tell, honest. Jim, however, he did not trust, and spoke of him, a young man in his late twenties, as slick, devious, a goof-off. He strongly suspected that Jim was stealing from the register. Apparently, Jim was kept on mainly because he had a talent for making attractive display

signs and did most of the lifting of heavy merchandise. Toward me, the boss's son, Jim was suspiciously patronizing. I, too, didn't trust him and sensed that in his covert antagonism against my father he wanted to use me as an ally. Toward what end I could not discern.

In the stock room at the back of the store, which was separated from the front by a floor to ceiling partition, my father put on a starched white jacket and after giving me some instructions—this he did without any eye contact— for the unpacking and shelving of some can goods, he reentered the store, there to work behind the counter for several hours until closing time. The draining life of a grocer. If he hated the grocery business so much, why did he stay in it? My mother said that at his age it was too late for him to change to another occupation. Since coming to America in 1921, except for a period of working in factories of Manhattan's garment district, his experience was entirely in the grocery business. After my parents moved from New York to Chicago in1924, one of my mother's uncles, a prosperous grocer, hired my father as an apprentice clerk. From that apprenticeship of some two years, and with financial help from relatives, he opened a small store of his own in the Western-Division Street neighborhood of

the Northwest Side, and soon the business was doing quite well. From that modest beginning, he moved to a much larger store on Milwaukee Avenue in the Logan Square district, a store that required the employment of two and sometimes three clerks, and for a time, before the emergence of the A & P supermarket and other chain stores, it was a highly profitable enterprise. My parents moved to a three bedroom deluxe apartment in a desirable neighborhood, hired a live-in maid to look after my brother and me so that my mother could devote more hours to working in the store, bought a Buick(then the symbol of middle-class success in Chicago), purchased wearing apparel from exclusive shops. This financial success was achieved by a man with no formal American education whatsoever. Blessed with an ear for languages and a quick mind, he began to speak and write creditable English within four years after arriving in New York. In April 1927 he was granted full citizenship. By the early thirties, self-taught and driven by a passion for knowledge, he was reading authors who were particularly popular with the John Reed Club membership, writers like Bernard Shaw, H. G. Wells, Lytton Strachey, Sinclair Lewis, Dos Passos,

Upton Sinclair, Ibsen, Gorky. Indeed, one of the salesmen who came to the store for orders referred to him as the intellectual grocer.

"He's very unhappy in the store," my mother confided to her relatives, "but how can we afford to change to another kind of business and lose what we have?"

Readily judgmental, I was not convinced by what seemed to me then her rationalization for his being stuck in the store. With a little courage, couldn't he break out of the trap he kept complaining about and find a better way to earn a living? Where there's a will didn't there have to be a way? I was steeped in familiar bromides on the power-of-positive-thinking. . . .

Unpacking can goods in the stock room, I shuddered, worrying that father might order me to go to the basement for some merchandise which was not available elsewhere in the store. I feared a descent into the basement, a dank, dimly lit, eerily silent nether world festooned with spider webs—worse, it harbored rats. My father knew that it did. He hardly could have forgotten the time he had sent me down there to bring up some cardboard cartons. Suddenly, without warning, out of the shadows, a rat sprang, leapt over my head, disappeared. Terrified, I

screamed, bolted up the stairs. My father had heard the scream. When I told him what had happened, he groaned scornfully and summoned my mother. I was still trembling as he said to her, sarcastically, "Come look at your bar mitzvah bocher!" Probably aware that anything she might proffer in my defense would only further provoke him, my mother said nothing. Shaking his head, as though in disgust, he walked off. But for the rest of that day, he avoided meeting my eyes.

I had been in the stock room for only a little while when suddenly I heard his voice from behind the partition screaming, "Out! Out you! Come in here again and I'll throw you out!"

I cautiously went to the doorway. Standing in the center of the store, he was furiously shaking his fist at an elderly woman wearing a babushka. Obviously terrified, she kept backing away from him. There were no other customers present, Bobbie and Jim apparently were on a break. My mother, directly behind him, placed a restraining hand on his arm. "Chaim, please!" "Don't mix in!" he snapped and brushed her hand away. The elderly woman kept retreating until her back was almost to the front door. She held out her hands in a pleading gesture. "What did I do to you, mister?" she whimpered in a Slavic accent that

suggested she could be Polish or perhaps Bohemian, the predominant nationalities in the neighborhood. Her question exacerbated my father's fury. Snatching a can from a floor display, he cocked his arm. The woman lurched, as though her legs had buckled, turned and fled through the doorway into the street.

The can still clenched in his hand, he stood stiffly beside the floor display, glaring at the doorway, as though to deter the old woman from reentering. "Goddamn this life!" he cried.

He stood there a few moments, then moved toward the stock room. I hurriedly returned to unpacking merchandise, not wanting him to wonder whether I had witnessed the scene with the old woman.

He was sitting on a carton, slumped forward, supporting his head with both hands, and looking as though he was deaf to the ringing of the cash register and the blurred voices from the other side of the partition.

Such a lousy thing to do! I thought. What had the elderly customer done to justify such rage? A poor woman who had to count her pennies, who went from store to store buying the below-cost specials. Later, according to my mother's account of the incident, when

my father told the old woman that the advertisement posted on the store windows clearly stipulated a limit of two bags of sugar to a customer, she had muttered something to the effect that he was being mean. That was the spark, and he had exploded.

His face pressed into his hands, he was slumped over the carton. Cry baby! I thought.

My mother continued waiting on trade; she was always calm when he went beserk. As soon as there was a lull, I anticipated, she would come to the stock room and try to settle him down, just as she had on other occasions. Looking at him with worried eyes, she would remind him that his doctor had warned against such upsets. She would offer to bring him a cold wash rag and avoid criticizing his behavior with the old woman. My mother was inclined to make excuses for his violent temper. "Chaim is a good person," she would say to her relatives. "It's the worries from the store and the pain in his stomach that makes him fly off the handle."

The stock room had only one metal-barred window, and he was turned toward it, his back to the partition. From behind a tall column of cartons, I watched him. Distantly, the sounds of a clanging street car

and a truck lumbering by, then the blasting of a pneumatic drill; Milwaukee Avenue was being widened to keep up with the changing times.

"Chaim, are you all right? My mother had entered the stock room.

"All right, all right," he said sharply, as though annoyed that she should witness his distress.

"Can I get you a cold rag?"

He did not reply.

"The doctor said you shouldn't — "

"He doesn't have to deal with such drek. If she comes in here again, I'll throw her out."

"Why don't you take off for a couple of hours?" she proposed.

"Maybe," he said, gruffly.

All the while, although he had to be aware that I was nearby, he didn't so much as glance in my direction. And I kept my face averted lest he suppose that I was drawing satisfaction from observing his misery.

After my mother returned to waiting on trade, he slowly stood up, removed his jacket, put on an overcoat and left. I did not hear him tell my mother where he was going.

* * *

His rage against the elderly woman was representative of why I feared my father. A more telling incident occurred two years earlier, in the the summer of 1935.

The sun was bright over Lake Michigan. On this Sunday of my remembrance, the entire mispocheh, in a procession of Buicks, had traveled from Chicago to this beach in the Indiana Dunes. The women, my mother and aunts, were arranging large portions of food on picnic tables located a few yards from the shoreline, while the men, my father and uncles, were talking about their respective businesses (almost all of them were grocery stores), F. D. R., worrisome developments in Hitler's Germany, their endangered relatives back in the Soviet Union, and so on. The little children were building sand castles. My five-year-old brother, Samuel, was at home because of some minor ailment and was being looked after by Jean, our live-in maid. The older cousins, I among them, mechanically threw a softball back and forth, passing time before

we would be summoned to the tables. My maternal grandparents sat on cloth camping chairs and watched their grandchildren at play. Their faces reflected a sense of well-being; they were happy to be included in family outings.

But if everyone else appeared relaxed and in good spirits, my father looked tense, disgruntled. I would have wanted to say to him, Why don't you smile at least once in a while? I perceived from past experience what was bothering him. He did not want to be there and doubtless would have preferred to be home, bent over a book—reading was one of his few pleasures, a particular solace. There were many books by historians, philosophers and fiction writers in our flat, the public library was his second home, and he subscribed to a number of periodicals. He would return home spent and morose from a long grinding day in the store and directly after dinner would retire to the living-room and his books. Long past midnight he would still be reading. From their bedroom, my mother would cry out, "Chaim, come to bed. You have to open the store early. You need sleep." "In a little while," he would reply, sharply.

He had come to the Dunes only for my mother's sake. All week long she worked in the store, so it was only fair that she should attend the picnic with her parents, brothers and sisters. Father would not deny her this pleasure. Still, except for my Aunt Bella and especially my gentle grandfather, whom he much respected as a wise man with a warm heart for everyone, the others put him out of sorts. To my mother he would speak of her brothers, sisters and in-laws as empty heads. Their mundane chatter got on his nerves.

He saw Bella, my mother's younger sister, as different. She read, enjoyed classical music, shared his Marxist views. They clearly were fond of each other. A beautiful, vivacious woman, my Aunt Bella was a marvelous dancer. In my romanticized imagination she was daringly unconventional, someone who would be capable of leaving her husband—their marriage was a troubled one—to do the unthinkable for a married Jewish woman (this was 1935) : take a non-Jewish lover. Sometimes I would wonder whether my father would have been happier being married to her rather than to my mother who, although kind, practical, dependable, and self-sacrificing for her family, certainly was not beautiful and vivacious.

Shortly after my mother and aunts began arranging food on the table, my father went for a swim. None of my uncles joined him; they preferred to sit on the beach, conversing with one another. Recalling that family outing, I have a vivid image of him as a swimmer. Clad in a swim suit, his five-foot-four frail body was marked by spindly legs, sunken chest, thin shoulders. But his biceps and forearms looked surprisingly muscular—probably from years of lifting merchandise in the store. I feared those arms, the force with which they had struck me on a few occasions.

He strode into the surf, kneeled, dove, and began doing a breast stroke. The ease and smoothness with which he moved through the water astonished me because he was patently unathletic. The two times at family picnics that I saw him throwing or running after a softball, he looked embarrassingly awkward. So where had he learned to swim like *that*? Certainly not as a new immigrant when he worked in Manhattan's sweat shops, nor later when he toiled long days in grocery stores. So probably in Russia, in the small town of his childhood. I knew so little about his life in the old country.

Watching him move steadily away from the shore, I felt both a sense of pride that he swam so well but also anger because I couldn't swim, and he didn't want to teach me—unless you counted just that one time earlier in the summer. . . .

We were at the Oak Street Beach in Chicago. He instructed me to lie on my stomach in the water and with my head above the surface. He said he would hold me up so that I wouldn't go under. This did little to assure me; I was deathly afraid of drowning. Looking irritated, put upon—perhaps my mother had coaxed him into giving me the lesson—he perfunctorily demonstrated how to do the breast stroke. Standing in water up to his waist, he placed his hands under my stomach. Then he told me to start moving my arms, simulating a breast stroke. Desperate to please him, I thrashed about. Then his hands slowly began withdrawing. Startled, I jacked my head higher above the surface. Suddenly there was no support under me. "Go!" he commanded. But I froze, sank. "Go!" he shouted. Water filled my nose, mouth, I gasped, groped for air. Then his arms were raising me above the surface. Sputtering, I stood up on unsteady legs. His eyes were turned away, he was shaking his head contemptuously. Then he started moving toward

the shore. I followed. All the while he remained silent, tight-jawed. I had expected to hear his disapprobation. Nothing. When we were out of the water and in sight of my mother, who had been sitting on the beach watching us, he abruptly turned around, reentered the surf and swam off. Shaken, I went slowly toward my mother.

Earlier, on learning from her that he was going to give me a lesson, I fantasized triumphantly swimming through the water on my own. Father would give me one of his rare smiles. And he would even do what I had enviously observed other fathers doing with their children: take me up on his back and, with my hands clasped under his chest, we would swim away from the shore, riding waves together.

I had miserably failed him.

And now, at the Indiana Dunes beach, he again was off swimming by himself. I watched him steadily moving away from the shore until he was barely visible. But why was he going out *that* far? I wondered. To show off? Or to distance himself from the sight of those relatives who irritated him? And from me, too? Anyway, wasn't it a foolish risk to swim out that far by himself? Because what if he suddenly developed a cramp? Who could help him? He could drown. *Did I really*

want him to die? But even as I considered this disturbing question, he had turned around and was heading back toward the beach. I wanted to avoid his look of disgust at a thirteen-year-old boy who still couldn't swim. Before he arrived, I had to get away, quickly.

From the outset of our arrival on the beach, I had been keenly aware of a particular dune and thought about climbing to its top. At the rear of the beach, it rose up, conspicuously higher than any other peak in sight. Now I went toward it, as to an escape route, intending to climb up and back down before everyone would be called to the tables for lunch. Moments before, I had casually mentioned to my mother that I was going to explore the beach. Preoccupied with her sisters, she had absently nodded. If father had been present—he was still in the water—I would have required his permission.

The way up was not difficult. My gyms sank into sand soft as silk. The dune glistened in sunlight. Gradually the sound of the surf became faint. I ascended along a side of the dune, and from that perspective the picnickers on the beach were not visible.

I climbed in a world of sand and silence.

Then I had reached the summit. Standing there, I surveyed a domain—*my* domain—of sky and space. Below in the distance the lake flowed to the horizon; far beyond it were the shores of Michigan. To my left and right were dunes like ocean liners moored to their berths. And now I had a full view of the gathering on the beach. From this lookout, I could not identify my parents as distinguished from the others. No matter, because who down there would take notice of my absence? Well, father might. If so, he would complain to mother that I belonged on the beach, in the company of my cousins, not off somewhere.

It was tranquil on the summit. What would it be like to stay here for a long while? I imagined sleeping overnight under the stars and waking with the sun's first light, waking to a bright new world. To the rising sun I would say, Hello, Sun! Hello!

Just then I heard a cry from below. Someone was calling my name. I vaguely made out that one of the toy-sized figures on the beach stood apart from the tables and was waving wildly in my direction. It was, as I feared, Father. From the intensity of his waving, I sensed that he was furious. *What have I done wrong now?* Had everyone started eating already? But how could that be? I hadn't been

away for more than fifteen minutes while the food was still being laid out on the tables. Would he browbeat me in front of everyone?

Down I flew, free falling effortlessly, as in a dream.

On reaching the base of the dune, to demonstrate that I had responded at once to his summons, I began running hard. Spraying sand, I came rushing up to the table where he and mother, my grandparents and Aunt Bella were sitting. They had already started eating. I averted meting father's eyes. He said nothing. Why? Possibly because he was aware that my grandparents were nervously watching him. More than once, they had witnessed his explosive temper.

Eat slowly. At home he would sternly reprimand me for eating too fast. "Your father works hard," my mother would interpolate, "so he doesn't like to see you swallowing food." I saw this explanation as an attempt to protect me. Now, studiously avoiding his eyes, I took small pieces of food from a paper plate and munched, exaggerately working my jaws.

What have I done that is so awful? I brooded. A few minutes late, that's all. Did this justify his anger?

What I could not comprehend then is my going off to the dune was, in his eyes, a symbolic act of independence, one that threatened to sever my bondage to him. Perhaps, too, as I know now, he would have liked to walk away from his responsibilities as the family provider. But since he would not do this, could it be that as a kind of compensation for his chained existence, he would need to keep me in a state of perpetual submission? At any rate, I deperately needed a sign of his approval. But how to bring this about? Then I conceived a strategy to portray myself as a boy of commendable innocence who was unaware of the most basic information on sex, conception, pregnancy, and so he would look on me with new appreciation for having a clean mind.

My Aunt Phyllis sat with her husband and two kids at a table behind ours. She was in her eighth month of pregnancy, according to what I had overheard from one of the relatives. I waited, rehearsing my ploy and allowing what should have been enough time for him to finish eating. Partly turning toward him, I said, "Dad?" He glanced up, blinking, as though my voice had abruptly jerked him out of a reverie. "Yes, what is it?" he asked in a gruff, tight-lipped tone. I hesitated, then said, obsequiously, "Aunt Phyllis has a great big bulge over her stomach.

Why is that?" Even now it shocks me that I was so incredibly stupid, so deluded, to suppose that this ploy would find favor in his eyes.

He stopped chewing. His eyes bulged. He made a choking sound, as though something had stuck in his throat. Springing up, he flung his paper plate to the ground. "Damn you!" he cried. "Almost thirteen years old and doesn't even know that much! Idiot! Stupid idiot!"

For my relatives it must have been as though out of a clear blue sky suddenly a clap of thunder exploded.

Terrified, I jumped up, wheeled, banging a knee against an edge of the table, and took off.

I ran along the shoreline, he pursued me. "Idiot!" he kept screaming, like a madman. I ran to escape from his fists, ran to be free of him, to have my own life. Even now, decades after that incident, though his bones lie in a Chicago cemetery, am I still running from him?

Probably I would have outrun him had I not tripped on some debris and fallen.. Even so, why did I not get up at once and resume running instead of lying face down in the sand, as though waiting for him to catch up? Then he was on me, fists flailing, pounding my back, shoulders, arms. He beat me out of his thwarted past in Russia and the

life that had soured for him in America. He beat me for his iron years as a prisoner in the store. He beat me to scourge, drive out some inner demon in himself. Face in the sand, I wept from the pain and the shame of my helplessness. I wept because I hated him—and did not want to.

Then my uncles Joe and Sam were pulling him off me. I heard, "Chaim, stop it! . . .not right . . . only a boy, Chaim!" Cautiously, I turned over and saw on father's face something that I had never seen before. Not an expression of fury but, perhaps, remorse. Also, it was as though the rage in him had emptied out, leaving him hollow.

And now he and Uncle Sam headed back toward the picnic area. Uncle Joe pulled me to my feet and with a handkerchief brushed off most of the sand from my head and face while saying something to the effect that my father really loved me, really hadn't meant to hurt me.

He meant it all right, I thought.

Approaching the picnic tables, the four of us must have presented a somber procession. I dreaded seeing the sympathetic faces of my mother and the others. And I anticipated—correctly as it turned out—

that for the rest of the day the pleasant ambience of the picnic would be spoiled.

That evening my mother and I circled the streets behind our apartment building. Solicitous in the aftermath of the beating, she had insisted on accompanying me. My shoulders and back flared with pain. I was grimly silent until she attempted to explain away his behavior. "Son, he didn't mean to hurt you . . . the store drives him crazy. He loves you. Please don't be mad at him . . ."

Blah blah blah, I thought. "He meant it all right," I said sharply, wanting to punish her for defending him. "Beating up your own kid. That's pretty bad!"

Visibly shaken, she shook her head. "It's only because your father is a very nervous man. He had a hard life in Russia and when he first came to this country."

"I don't want to hear that old story again!" "There's no excuse. I'm just a kid."

"I know he's feeling sorry."

"Sure, sure." I wanted her not only to feel pity for me but also to express indignation over what he had done. Anyway, why make

excuses for him since he often verbally mistreated her? Even worse, he may have physically abused her.

I had in mind the incident which occurred one night shortly before the Indiana Dunes beach outing. A violent lightning and thunder storm had awakened me. The storm was so frightening that I momentarily considered going to my parents' bedroom to get their assurance that lightning wouldn't strike our apartment. But only momentarily, because my father would resent being awakened, and he would sardonically cite the intrusion as another example of my fearful nature. The storm intensified. Unable to remain in bed any longer I got up, opened the door and stepped into the hallway, which connected my parent's bedroom with mine, and hunkered down on the floor, intending to remain there until the storm died. I heard their voices. "Please Chaim! Don't! Chaim, no! Leave me alone! No!" Never before had I heard her so agitated.

All the while, he kept cursing in fragments of Yiddish which I did not grasp, and she was crying and moaning, as though in severe pain. Had he hit her?

I felt helpless to intervene. What's a kid supposed to do? Rush in there and rescue her? He would beat me up, just the way he had at the Dunes. I saw myself as cowardly.

Then the sounds of my mother crying and moaning stopped. There was a puzzling silence. Why? Even as I was grappling with this question, the storm subsided.

I returned to my bedroom and lay awake to listen for sounds from their bedroom. But there were none . . . .

On our brief walk that evening, I said to myself that someday I would be the stronger one, and then if he ever tried to hit me I would hit him first—and hard enough to knock him down. After that, the tables would be turned: he would be afraid of me and back off.

Before we returned to the apartment, my mother again pleaded with me to forgive him, but I was too choked with anger to promise that I would.

* * *

Why was my father such a bitter, unhappy man? What was he like before he met mother? How were the early years of their marriage? A short while before her death, my mother wrote me a long informative letter about their life in Russia and their early years in this country. She first met him when he was fleeing from Petlura's bloody massacres of Jews. Her small town of Volkovinitz in the Ukraine was located on a railroad line. One afternoon in 1919 several young Jewish men got off a train which had stopped at the town's only station and were directed to her parents' home.

"When I mention the name Petlura to my grandchildren," she wrote, " they don't know who he was. I tell them how this killer and other Russian nationalists like him murdered 20,000 Jews. One time his troops came to Deroznia, your father's town, which was about eighty miles from Volkovinitz, and in cold blood slaughtered one third of the Jewish population. They cut the throats of old men and infants and young girls and women were raped before the eyes of their parents and husbands. The bloodshed lasted all night and the next morning some peasants rushed to bargain with the murderers for jewelry and clothing

smeared with blood. It was from these beasts that Chaim and his friends were running.

"My mother made the samovar and served the young men a modest meal of bread and eggs. They obviously were intelligent and spoke to my parents with respect. All the while, I had eyes for the one called Chaim. He was slender and had a sensitive face. He seemed quieter, more serious than the others. My mother quickly learned their family backgrounds. She recognized the surname of Chaim's parents, a family with a good reputation. She learned that he was nineteen, only a year older than me. She already had this young man in mind for me, since I was the oldest daughter. While my younger sister, Rose, and I served the meal to our visitors, we flirted with them. But I didn't do this with Chaim because he seemed so reserved. He didn't seem to be interested in me.

"The young men stayed with us for a few hours before returning to the railroad station and continuing on their journey. Before too long they were able to return to their homes when Petlura's bands in the region were temporarily driven back by the Russian army.

"In the days and weeks that followed, I thought about the young man from Deroznia. A month after we first met him, Chaim unexpectedly came to our home to pay his respect to my parents for their hospitality. At first he seemed interested only in my sister Rose, probably because she was pretty. But then to my surprise, he asked me to take a walk with him.

"We went along a country road, talking freely. My previous impression of him held up. He was intelligent and well-read, particularly in history and literature. At one point, he recited from memory a few lines from Bialik's 'The Yeshiva Student.' Later that evening we sat on the front porch of our home. It was a lovely spring evening with a full moon. Off in the distance we could see the railroad station. Before us were open fields, which in the summer were covered with wheat and corn. Past these fields were the woods where I and my sisters Rose and Bella would pick berries and mushrooms. It was beautiful and quiet there.

"I can't remember why we began singing Russian songs. Our voices must have echoed because suddenly we heard in the distance some voices that seemed to be singing along with us. We looked and

saw that a military train had pulled into the station, and the singing was coming from Russian soldiers. Then we and the soldiers sang together songs of liberation, brotherhood, peace, a better world. These soldiers were probably on their way to the battlefields, and I couldn't help thinking that some of them wouldn't come back.

"We kept singing until my father came out to the porch and asked me to go to bed. My dear father was not a strict parent, but he worried about my being alone with Chaim so late at night. He didn't have to worry. We didn't even hold hands.

"Chaim asked if he could write to me, and so we began exchanging letters. After that evening, he came to see me a few more times. His town was only a couple of hours away by train. I learned about his background. His parents were poor but they had a taste for learning and they had high expectations of their son. Very few Jewish children were admitted to public schools in that town, so Chaim's parents used to scrimp and save until they had a few rubles to pay for their son's private lessons and for books, which were expensive. He covered them with heavy brown paper for protection. Chaim was an excellent

student. He was only sixteen when he had young boys and girls as his students for both private and group lessons.

"One of Chaim's favorite teachers was a revolutionary who lived in a basement, a cold dark room. He made stew of the cheapest meats, and in the same cooking pot he made his tea. In the morning he would buy a loaf of bread and divide it into three pieces for breakfast, dinner and supper. If he was tempted into eating two pieces at lunch, then he went hungry at suppertime. He had a big influence on Chaim. They would sing revolutionary songs together. This teacher believed that the working class would rise up one day and live like human beings instead of animals. Later, he was caught by the Czarist police for holding secret meetings in the woods and sent to Siberia. Chaim never heard from him again.

"Some six months after Chaim and I first met we became engaged. About this time, Chaim had to choose between being conscripted by the Red Army, which was known for its anti-Semitism, or working for the Bolshevik government. Then a group of Red commissars came by our house because my parents added to their income by serving meals to train passengers, and I struck up a conversation with one of the

officials. He told me that he and his colleagues were forming a government office in Czernostrow, which was not far from the Austrian border. I got up enough nerve to ask him whether he could give my fiancé a job. Have him come to see me, this commissar said. In exchange for this favor, he expected me to sleep with him but I wouldn't.

"Chaim went to Czernostrow and was given a job as a secretary and junior commissar for the local government office. His main work was to confiscate grain and produce for a Red Army unit. He worked in Czernostrow for a while and then he wrote my mother that it was time for us to marry. He took a brief leave and came to Volkovinitz.

"I remember how we were married. Just a few friends and his parents and mine. The day after the wedding someone took a picture of my father, Chaim and me. I still have that picture. My dear father sits against the trunk of a tree. He is wearing a tie, which is unusual for him. Beside my father, Chaim sits on a newspaper spread over the ground. He too is wearing a suit and tie. And there I am in an eyelet blouse with a ruffle across the neck, a mid-calf skirt and high-heeled shoes with a strap across the instep. I look very happy.

"We married on a Friday morning and two days later left for Czernostrow. On our arrival, the train station was deserted. The town itself was fifteen miles away. Chaim left our two packs containing pillows, comforters, linens, and clothing—this was all of our possessions—in my safekeeping and began walking. I sat alone in the empty station until late in the afternoon. No trains went by except military ones. I worried that maybe something awful had happened to my husband.

"Finally he returned and was accompanied by a peasant who was trembling out of fear. Chaim had used his position as a commissar to confiscate the man's wagon and horse. We put our packs into the wagon, which was loaded with hay, and climbed on top of the stacks. Then the peasant was ordered to drive to Czernostrow, where Chaim had already "confiscated" a room. All this confiscating made me nervous. It didn't seem right. Besides, wasn't it dangerous for Jews to have such power over non-Jews? Chaim explained that the confiscating was necessary because Jews, who ordinarily would have helped us, were afraid to shelter anyone connected with the Bolshevik government. They were afraid that if the Bolsheviks were overthrown by the Russian nationalists, they would be punished.

"Anyway. we reached Czernostrow and stopped before a house on the main street. The peasant handed down our packs, bowed down before us, jumped back on the wagon, crossed himself several times, and then the poor man took off fast, before another commissar would stop him.

"An elderly woman and man greeted us with a smile but fear in their eyes. This couple was glad to have the commissar and his wife stay with them, because this would mean that their home would be protected by the local Bolshevik officials. The woman prepared a samovar with tea made of shredded carrots, along with coarse black bread freshly baked from ground wheat and pavidla.

"While we ate, Chaim looked happy. I could tell that he felt proud about being able to look after us. He wanted me to feel safe. The next day I got a ration book and started learning how to be a housewife. But it was strange, very strange. Back in Volkovinitz, I would never have imagined myself as the wife of a commissar for the Soviet Union!

"This is how it was in Czernostrow. Chaim, with an escort of soldiers, would go to nearby villages for a day or two and confiscate wheat, corn, potatoes, other vegetables for the Red Army unit in the

area. He wore a khaki jacket, an army official's hat, riding pants and carried a briefcase. He looked like an important government official. But because he didn't feel good about doing this work, he confiscated much less from the peasants than did other commissars.

"Not all of Chaim's dealings in the Czernostrow region were with Gentiles. No sooner did the local Jewish community learn that he was a Jew than they began coming to him with their troubles. This is one example. Just before the High Holidays, Jewish farmers and their families from all over the region came to Czernostrow. They would stay with their friends for a few days so that they could pray in the town's only synagogue. They would arrive with live chickens, geese, bread, eggs. Early one morning we heard a knock on the door to our room. We were puzzled as to who this could be. Chaim got out of bed and carefully opened the door. There stood a Jewish farmer. He was trembling and began crying, kissing my father's hands, pleading for help. He said that he had come to town for the holidays and in his wagon had been a few live geese to feed his family. A Red commissar had stopped him, confiscated the wagon and the geese and threatened to arrest him, charging that he was selling food on the black market.

Chaim immediately dressed and went with the farmer to the government office and got back the geese. Soon after Chaim had returned to our room, we heard a knock on the door and there was the farmer again, this time with two live geese under his arms. He wanted to show his appreciation. But what in the world were we to do with live geese! I was afraid to even touch them. Fortunately, the woman of the house where we were staying took them to the shochet. I gave her one goose and we had a feast with the other.

"Six weeks after our arrival in Czernostrow, my parents in Volkovinitz heard that the Petluraists were coming back to the Ukraine, denouncing Jews as Bolshevik supporters and executing them. At the same time, pogroms were occurring in other parts of Russia. Anti-Semitic white Russians, whose businesses and houses had been taken over by the Red Army, were murdering Jews. To make matters worse, the Bolsheviks also began assassinating hundreds of Jews, claiming that they were black-market speculators and instigators of conspiracies against the government. Hatred of Jews in the Red Army became so bad that Chaim's life was in jeopardy.

"Petlura's bands were a short distance from Czernostrow when we packed our belongings and took the first train back to Volkovinitz. We traveled at night, sleeping on the floor of a coach with bundles under our heads. It was dawn when we reached the station. On seeing us with our bundles, my father did not need an explanation. After we had rested, he told Chaim and me that we would have to go to America because our lives were in danger. In America we would have a future. So that we could cross the border into Romania, he would give us money. I knew that he did not have enough for the rest of the family to escape and I didn't want to leave my parents, brothers and sisters behind. But my father kept insisting that we would have to leave. As it turned out, on the very next day my grandfather unexpectedly heard from a relative in New York who sent him the money to get the entire family to America.

"We prepared for our escape. First my parents sold or gave away most of our portable possessions to Gentile neighbors. The furniture was left where it was so as not to arouse suspicions because we would be leaving the country illegally, without visas, the cost of which was prohibitive. If we were caught, we would be sent to prison. Because

there were roving bands of thieves on the country roads, we sewed jewelry into the seams of our clothes and my parents put their money into tin cans and loaves of baked bread.

"How can I tell you how all of us felt the day we left? My mother walked over to the stove on which she had cooked thousands of meals and kissed it. I will never forget this. She bent down, kissed the floor, straightened up, and then all of us, my parents, two sisters Rose and Bella, two young brothers Sam and Joe, Chaim and I, walked slowly out of the house, the house where we had lived nearly all of our lives, leaving the front door open, not looking back.

"Carrying bundles, we walked to the end of Volkovinitz. The streets were full of Red Army soldiers. Our lives would have been in danger if someone had become suspicious that we were going to leave the country without permission from the authorities. The people in the streets probably thought that we were just moving from one place in town to another. We walked in pairs, each of us carrying two bundles filled with underwear, outer clothes, and pillows. I remember how frightened we all looked. Only Chaim seemed unafraid and he kept saying to everyone that we were going to make it to Romania.

"Just beyond the town, a wagon filled with hay and its driver, a peasant woman, were waiting. We placed our bundles into the wagon and climbed aboard. Now, for the first time, what we were doing hit us. We felt like refugees.

"For two days and nights we traveled without stopping and finally reached Mogilev on the border between Russia and Bessarabia. We walked behind the wagon, our bundles hidden under the hay. Several times the wagon was stopped by soldiers, but they did not search it because the driver bribed them.

"Late at night, two peasants who had been hired in advance to row us across the river appeared and led us over a slippery bridge to one shore of the Dniester. It was cold, dark, raining and our clothes were soaked. My father and my two brothers, Sam and Joe, who were very mature for their years, got into a rowboat. A few minutes after it moved off, the boat tipped over and bundles were flung into the water. There were screams and a shot. My father and brothers swam back to where the rest of us stood on the shore. Now the two peasants revealed what had been a trick to get money by turning all of us over to the

coast guardsmen who were stationed on the Russian side of the river. We were taken at gunpoint to a farmer's barn and locked inside.

"We waited in the darkness among animals. I pictured being sent to Siberia in chains. After some time, the barn door opened and two soldiers carrying lanterns entered. They demanded "those Jewish girls," pointing at me and my sister Rose. Chaim was very upset. I knew that he would fight those soldiers rather than give me up to them and so I whispered to him that it was going to be all right. But he only shook his head.

"The soldiers left after my father gave them a large sum of money, which they openly shared with the two peasants and the guardsmen. Then we walked back to Mogilev, where we rested for a couple of days and made plans for another river crossing.

"One late night we got into two rented rowboats. I remember feeling that each stroke of the oars was bringing us farther away from Russia and toward freedom. After about a half hour of rowing, we reached the opposite shore. There we were met by a guide who had been hired to lead us through the mountains. From then on, we had to

hike steep trails with the bundles on our backs. We were exhausted but kept going.

"Finally we came to Issef in Romania and were brought to a rabbi's house. Once inside, we kissed and hugged one another. Tears of relief were on our faces. We had made it out of Russia!

"I remember that on a table was a samovar and a big loaf of round white bread. We kept looking at that bread, couldn't believe what we were seeing. For years we had eaten nothing but coarse black bread. The rabbi, a gentle soul, kept pouring tea into our cups.

"Chaim was very affectionate. He kissed my hands and spoke about a new life in America. He promised that we would have our own apartment and nice furniture. He wanted us to start having children soon. He was sure that I would be a good mother.

"The rabbi kept asking us to eat, and so we sat down at his table. My father carefully cut the bread into equal portions and we ate. That bread was delicious. It tasted of freedom.

"When we came to America I was already pregnant, and you were born in 1922. In New York we lived on the Lower East Side. Our flat was cold and gloomy and your father and I slept on folding cots. As an

infant you developed a terrible ear infection and had 104 fever. We almost lost you. Your father worked as a helper to a cutter in a clothing factory and I worked in a shop putting bones and stays into corsets. Chaim hated the work and he felt that one of the bosses was always picking on him. One time he saw that his pay check wasn't right, that it should have showed two dollars more than it did. But when Chaim complained, this man said something insulting about Jews. Your father got so angry he picked up a scissors and pointed it at the man's face, screaming, 'You cheated me!' The boss beat up your father, threw him out of the factory and warned him not to return unless he wanted his Jewish behind to be beaten. Chaim ran down the street and found a policeman. 'He killed me! He killed me!' he kept crying in his immigrant English. The policeman was nice and said he wasn't killed. Chaim got the policeman to go back with him to the factory and the boss had to turn over the two dollars. Your father would never let anyone take advantage of him. He was a fighter.

"Anyway, we made just enough money to pay the rent each month. Sometimes we had to borrow from one of my uncles in

Brooklyn just to buy food. But at least there was no Petluras in New York.

"I wrote to some relatives in Chicago, and before long we went there. People said that if you couldn't make a living in Chicago you couldn't make it anywhere. At first we stayed with one of my aunts and uncles and they gave your father a job as a clerk in their grocery store so that he could learn the business. We watched every cent we spent, and after a year your father looked for a store. Finally he found one on Western Avenue, near the Division Street streetcar barn, and bought it from a Bohemian woman who was taking in only seventy-five dollars a week. In a little while, we worked up the business to five hundred dollars a week. Now we were able to pay back all that we owed to relatives and save up a few thousand dollars, enough to move to a beautiful flat and buy custom-made furniture.

"Then we had a daughter but she died from pneumonia after only eighteen days. Your father took her death very hard. He cried a lot. But we were very happy when your brother, Samuel, was born in 1930.

"A little later, we bought a much larger store on Milwaukee Avenue, near Logan Square. Your father hated the grocery business

even though we made a good living. But he was afraid to give up what we had and start over again. He was very unhappy. That's about the time he started having stomach pains and the doctors couldn't help him. Son, the rest of the story you know."

Reading the letter, I was impressed with how stalwart my parents had been under pressure in the Soviet Union and during their early immigrant years in New York. Mother's description of how protective her husband had been during their stay in Czernostrow and on their flight from Russia moved me. As did her account of how tender and affectionate he had been when they were safe in Issef. Growing up in Chicago, I had rarely observed these qualities in him. What particularly struck me was the picture of his intense grieving over the death of the female infant. I had not thought he could be so openly emotional. On the other hand, I shuddered on reading how he brandished a scissors to threaten a factory boss, for this description recalled the beating he had given me at the Indiana beach outing. "You cheated me!" he had screamed, and that hysterical accusation now strikes me as peculiarly illustrative of a man who chronically felt that he had been cheated of a birthright—but what that might have been I dc not know. In any event,

apart from the overall sanguine perspective of my mother's letter, this much is clear: despite having forged a comfortable material existence for his family, despite money in the bank, despite driving a top-of-the-line Buick and residing in an attractively furnished apartment with a live-in maid who looked after my younger brother and did much of the house work, despite providing annual two-week vacations for my mother, brother and I in South Haven or Union Pier, despite all these amenities and accomplishments, he felt bitterly unsatisfied. His self-contempt and misery as a grocer was etched on his face. He could have said of his life in Chicago, "I found no peace." Still, in my memory there are one or two times that seem exceptions to his general condition of unhappiness. As on that afternoon at Riverview.

It was obvious that he wanted to make it up to me after the Dunes beach incident. The "make up," to my astonishment, was an afternoon at Riverview, in that era Chicago's popular amusement park. To see my father as a patron of such a place would be a contradiction in terms. In his language, Riverview would be a foolishness. Only once

had I been there on a summer playground outing. My mother must have remembered how much I had enjoyed that day and so probably encouraged my father to take me there.

Now, a week after the Dunes episode, we were on our way. I was both looking forward to the park and yet feeling apprehensive. Supposing he would feel resentful about having to put up with a kind of entertainment that ordinarily he would despise, and that out of this resentment would turn on me again? Seated beside him in the Buick, I was especially tense because of the silence between us. When finally he spoke it was to ask some questions about my school classes. I said that that they were all right It would not have been smart to reveal that I was lagging behind most students, especially in science classes. Most of the time I simply didn't comprehend what was going on. Intimidated by classmates who apparently did, I felt too ashamed to ask the teachers for help. The only other Jew in the class was outstanding, self-confident, and in contrast to his successes—painful as it is for me to acknowledge this now—I saw myself as a dumb Jew.

As we approached the park, I was thinking about which rides, even if he were to allow me to choose any, should I *not* ask to go on

because he would reject them out of hand. The very popular—and scariest—roller coaster ride in the park was The Bobs. From time to time, there had been accidents on this ride, and so many adults were not letting their kids go on it. So why would my father be any different?

On entering the park, we were caught up in a carnival atmosphere of pleasure-seeking crowds, the thunder of roller coaster rides in the far distance, pungent odors from food stands, the bellowing of barkers. As we walked along the main thoroughfare, I was not at all attracted to the spook rides, for on the summer program outing in Riverview I had found them to be boring.

We had been in the park for a short while when father inquired if there was something I would like to eat or drink. What I coveted was a red snow candy but didn't dare to ask for one. I knew how it would affect him if there was snow goo all over my face? So I politely opted for a coke.

When we came abreast of a shooting gallery, I stopped, bent down, pretending to tie a shoelace. Poised behind the gallery's counter were kids, some accompanied by adults, who were ecstatically firing

away at the stationary and moving targets of lions, tigers, bears. I envied them, imagining how it would feel to press the stock of a rifle against my shoulder, carefully squeeze the trigger, hear the ping ping of targets flipping over, and win one of the knick knack prizes on display. Perhaps even my father would be impressed by my skill as a sharpshooter. But that was not about to happen. Before I could even ask if I could shoot, he said, bluntly, that he didn't approve of guns, not even these that didn't fire live ammunition. Guns, he said in a lecturey tone, were a bad influence on young people. In retrospect, I realize that he probably associated guns, even those in a shooting gallery, with the pogroms and the firing squad murders of Jews that he had witnessed as a young man in Russia. Moreover, more than once in his store he had been held up at gun point by hoodlums and forced to turn over the register receipts. Today he would be a zealous advocate, I can imagine, for strict handgun control.

We went on and approached a wire cage inside of which an African American in black Sambo attire stood on a collapsible platform placed directly over a tank of water. He was taunting passerbys, daring them to knock him off his perch. You could buy three hardballs for a

dollar, and the idea was to hit a metal plate attached to the platform. Struck, it automatically collapsed with a cracking sound, dumping the black man into the tank. Soaked, pretending anger, cursing the thrower, swearing revenge, he would laboriously emerge from the tank, and climb back to his former position on the platform. When he dropped into the tank, the onlookers laughed, cheered. I did, too, but silently. My father didn't think the performance was funny_in fact, he was incensed. "Son," he said gravely, "Why do they laugh at this? To take away the dignity of this man. How humiliating! I cannot blame him. It's a job. But whoever profits from this is a skunk!" He vented further indignation, the source of which, I recognized, were his leftist views on racial justice. I acknowledged the validity of his outrage, but still, all I wanted was to test my skill as a thrower and win a prize.

So much to this point in our outing.

Then there were the electric bumper cars. Inside a rink, kids and adults in electric-driven cars were exuberantly crashing into one another. On colliding, some cars were sent spinning, others were rear-ended, flinging them against the rink's shock-absorbent tire-mounted walls. The drivers were having a wonderful time.

A few fathers I knew let their kids drive the family car for a couple blocks, but my father hadn't ever let me drive his car, not even around the corner. To steer the wheels of a bumper car at least would be a vicarious driving experience.

I would have thought that my father would be put off by the noise, the din, the shouting and raucous laughter inside the rink. So I was completely unprepared for his saying, with uncharacteristic warmth, "Son, I see from your face that you would like to do this thing." Although uncertain that I had heard him correctly, I must have nodded. "Then come." With that, he moved toward the ticket counter.

And that is how we—yes, the two of us—came to drive the electric cars.

After a few moments, getting the hang of it, I dodged cars that came right at me, their drivers bent on a collision. But in swerving out of the paths of their oncoming cars, I was blind-sided by other drivers. Then, gradually becoming aggressive, getting into the spirit of the rink, I slammed into cars, happily watching them spin out of control, their drivers jarred by the impact. All over the rink drivers were butting other cars, scooting away, and in turn being hit. The blare of screeching

wheels and crashes, of laughter, hooting, mock-curses—it was all great fun.

All the while, I deliberately avoided looking around to see how my father was doing. He might resent other drivers slamming into his car and make a scene But then suddenly, out of a clutch of cars, he appeared and swerved directly across my path. His face was flushed, and he was grinning and playfully waving at me, as though mounting a challenge. Incredulous, I watched him speed away. Then, making a sharp U turn, he came charging at me. His car slammed into mine, jerking it around. When I looked over my shoulder, he unmistakably was challenging me to strike back. But if I did so, wouldn't he be offended? And yet, if I didn't respond to his challenge wouldn't he see this reticence as further evidence of his son's fearful nature?

Even after all these years, I still can't explain what psychological mechanism might have jump-started me (Perhaps the impulse to get even for the beach incident?). I turned around and, not without trepidation, came at him, striking a side of his car. His head jolted back from the impact. But instead of looking angry, he appeared amused. He held out his hand, closing and opening it, as though daring me to do that

again. I did, and this time slammed head-on into his car. He looked startled but not angry.

And then we really got into it, butting and crashing into each other like a couple of rams with horns lowered, trying to gore each other. Banging into his car, seeing his body jolt, I felt exuberant. He too apparently was enjoying hitting and being hit.

When the rink bell sounded to warn the drivers that the allotted several minutes of driving was almost up, we were still at it, like two boxers still slugging it out in the center of the ring even after the bell had rung to end the round..

When the electric power was abruptly cut off, the cars automatically rolled to a halt.

As we were leaving the rink, he said, "I liked it." That admission alone would have made my day, but what happened next was even more incredible.

Even though the ride was not yet in sight, I heard the thunder of The Bobs and pictured how the riders would be screaming as the cars hurled downward. From what I had read, The Bobs went up about two hundred feet, fell over a hundred, reached speeds of sixty miles per

hour. Probably some riders threw up. I assumed that my father would be against my going on it. But even if he were to give me permission, would I *really* want to?

We stood before it. Cars were ascending to the top and plunging with a loud cracking sound. The wooden structure supporting the tracks shook. Riders were screaming. My father appeared to be studying my face. What is he afraid of? he might be thinking. A boy with so many fears. . . .

"Let's do this one, son." Had I heard him correctly? He wanted us to go on The Bobs! But why? To test me? I felt cornered. To try to back out now would be to trigger his contempt. Probably he himself had never been on a roller coaster but nevertheless was willing to go on the ride while his son was chicken?

And then we were seated side by side in one of six cars. A harness strapped us in. What if it didn't hold? I gripped the metal bar in front of us. My heart was pounding. My father didn't appear apprehensive. Perhaps he wanted me to observe he wasn't.

A gong sounded. The cars began to move. Slowly we climbed, as though a giant arm was lifting us into the sky. I gripped the bar more tightly. Could the harness open? I worried.

Then we reached the pinnacle of the ride. Bracing myself against the seat, I closed my eyes. Down we plunged. I lurched forward, couldn't catch my breath. Stop! Danger! Could be killed! Crazy! Stop! I was vaguely aware that a hand, his, gripped my shoulder, as though to shield me from a crash. The cars stopped diving and veered sharply to one side. We were making corkscrew turns at speeds of, as I learned later, fifty miles an hour or more. I closed my eyes, scrunched down lower in the seat. My father and I were bumping, lurching against each other. I prayed that the harness would hold, that his grip would prevent my being thrown out of the car and killed. Will he bawl me out for being chicken?

Finally the cars slowed. We were coasting to the end of the ride. I glanced at my father's face; he looked drained. His hand still clasped my shoulder. In my memory, then, he had never held me like that. I felt uneasy, hoped he would remove his hand.

"Such a ride!" he said, laughing nervously. His face was ashen. "Did you like it, son?" I nodded—what else could I have done? Said I hated the ride? His hand tightened, as though to draw me toward him. I stiffened, moved away. He looked pained.

Decades later, I would reflect on that moment. He must have felt rebuffed and may well have said to himself, *This* is what I have done to the boy. For what I did there can be no redemption. An afternoon at Riverview cannot whitewash what I did . . . . .

We got out of the car and began moving toward a park exit. My father was silent, looked darkly indrawn. Was he feeling what I was? That despite the playful high jinks of the bumper cars, our Riverview outing had ended badly.

* * *

Several months after the Riverview outing, the new boy said to me on his first day in our grade school class.," I'll meet you after school." Without looking at me, that's all he said. At the time we were in the school yard during a recess. Other guys standing near us had heard him, so the word quickly spread that after school there was going

to be a fight. Even as he issued his challenge, I knew that it had been a mistake to have hassled him. What if it turned out that he was good with his fists? I myself had never been in a fist fight. If he whipped me badly, the guys in my class would never let me forget it. After all, I had the advantage of being much taller and having much longer arms.

From the beginning of his appearance in class, I had him tagged as a rube. His gyms were of an antiquated kind that only a hick wouldn't be embarrassed to wear. His shirt and trousers looked as though he had dressed for a formal event. So I was not surprised on overhearing him tell the teacher that he was from a small town in southern Illinois. I saw him as a prime target for ridicule.

He sat directly across the aisle from me, fixed like stone on his seat, apparently attentive to our English teacher. What prompted him to challenge me to a fist fight is that I had deliberately provoked him by continually interrupting his note-taking, asking to borrow his pencil, pretending that mine had been misplaced. My father's perennial victim, I became the harasser. What fueled my appetite for the game is that a student who had been observing my ploy reacted with audible amusement.

As the end of the school day drew near, my anxiety escalated. Momentarily, I considered ducking out and going straight home. But then he and the guys in the class would call me yellow, and I would never be able to live that down. So I had to fight.

When the bell ending the class rang, I moved slowly out of the building into the school yard. The new guy strode directly behind me, as though to block any attempt I might make to take off. A number of the would-be spectators went before us, as though they had taken it upon themselves to find a fight site. Their faces were flushed with the expectation of seeing blood drawn. I prayed that a teacher would come by and separate us before the fight could get underway.

In a far corner of the yard that was not visible from the school building's windows, the spectators formed a circle around the two of us. I glanced at my opponent. His eyes were steely, unwavering.

He immediately moved toward me. Wanting the onlookers to see that this did not intimidate me, I took a couple of steps toward him. We stood face to face. "O. K., wise guy," he said, his mouth tightly clenched. "You had your fun in class. Let's see what you can do now." He cocked his arms, as I had seen professional boxers do. That left no room for

negotiation. So I cocked my right arm—my left was by far the weaker one. "C'mon, hook nose. Hit me," he challenged. Stung by his taunt, I desperately, wildly threw a roundhouse right at his head. With blinding speed, he blocked my hand as though brushing off a fly, and almost in the same instant his fist exploded against my nose. That punch had been executed in a compact, measured movement.

My face was on fire, blood gushed from my nose. The spectators were shouting, hooting; they wanted further action. Poker faced, his gimlet-like eyes trained on me and his arms remained cocked. "What's the matter, big shot? You don't want to fight?" It was clear to me that if I dared to hit back there would be more than just a nose bleed—some teeth could be knocked out. I didn't answer. "You quit?" I nodded.

The one punch fight was over. The spectators surrounded the victor, pumping his back, shoulders. Perhaps they already sensed that he would soon establish himself as one of the school's best fighters. Yet their adulation did not appear to please him; his poker-faced expression remained unchanged. Ignored, I remained apart from the others. My nose was covered with a blood-soaked handkerchief.

I hurriedly left the yard for home.

Shortly after that incident, I discovered that the new guy lived on our block. Our paths frequently crossed. Seeing him approach along the sidewalk, I would look away, to avoid giving him a pretext for a confrontation, and move over to the furthermost edge of the sidewalk. But this did not deter him from being provocative. "Hey, champ, let's mix it up for a couple rounds? Hey Izzy, how's the schnoz doing?" And then he would deliberately shove me out of his way.

One afternoon after school, probably because I hadn't responded to his previous provocations, he slammed into me with such force that I went sprawling face down against the sidewalk. He stood above me, gloating. Blood dripped from my lips. "Next time watch where you walk, schnoz."

After he moved on, I rose and went to our apartment building. From the doorway, I glanced back over my shoulder. He was down the block, looking in my direction and making obscene gestures.

On entering our apartment, I intended to go directly to the bathroom and staunch the bleeding before my mother—this was the one

day of the week that ordinarily she did not work in the store—could see me and make a big fuss. But she happened to be in the foyer when I entered and reacting to the sight of the blood-soaked handkerchief pressed against my lips, she cried out hysterically in Yiddish, "My God, what have you done to yourself!" I hurried past her to avoid an explanation.

When many minutes later I emerged from the bathroom after the bleeding had stopped, not only my mother was waiting for me but also my father. he had phoned him at the store, and he had rushed home. He scrutinized my face and then signaled for my mother and me to follow him to the kitchen. We sat and he demanded an explanation. So I described how the new guy had been bullying me. Wanting to appear in my father's eyes as entirely blameless. I left out of the description how I had initially provoked the new guy.

He listened and then said, coldly, "And you did *nothing* to stop him?"

I started to offer an explanation.

"Nothing!" he interrupted with a grimace of disgust. Turning abruptly to my mother, who all the while was holding her head in her hands, "Look, mother. Look at your brave son!" he said, sarcastically.

"Please, Chaim," she pleaded. She knew, as I did, that he was near the breaking point.

"Jewish men trembling, hiding under beds while Russian anti-Semites raped and killed their mothers, wives, daughters. Sure, Brushka, encourage him to be a trembling Jew. Don't ever raise your hands in defense. Don't fight back. Mr. Jew hater, please, please don't hurt me . . . ."

He jumped up, touched my shoulder. "Come!" I sensed what he was about to do. So did my mother. "Chaim, don't look for trouble. I beg you."

He didn't respond, didn't look back at her. I followed him.

On the sidewalk, a few houses down the block, my tormentor was swinging a baseball bat, as though simulating batting practice. Father went directly toward him. He seemed surprised to see us. I lagged behind. It was bad enough that my father was there. Now the new guy could tell everyone that I couldn't fight my own battles and had to hide

behind my father. But even worse, what if they got into a fistfight? Then people would condemn my father for picking on a school kid.

They stood shoulder to shoulder. In taking up a position to one side of my father, I was struck by the coincidence that he and the new guy were about the same height and build. If they got into a fight and my father was knocked around, the word would get around that not only had his son chickened out after only one punch but his old man had also been badly beaten. After all, he had demonstrated that he knew how to punch while my father, strong as he was, may never have been in a fistfight. Part of me wanted my father to whip the bully in retaliation for the bloodied nose and split lip. On the other hand, if my father were to be beaten easily, after only one or two punches, he would hardly be in a position to criticize me again for not fighting back.

"You did this to my son?" my father began, pointing to my bruised lips.

"What about it?" the bully said, sneering.

"My son says you threw him down on the sidewalk."

"Bullshit! He walked right in front of me. All I did was give him a little push."

My father turned to me, his eyes probed my face. "Does he tell the truth?"

I hesitated, knowing that to reply in the negative would be to incite more harassments in the days ahead.

"He pushed me," I murmured. "And for no reason."

"Bullshit! Cry-baby goes running home. Daddy, oh daddy, help me. A bad, bad boy wants to hurt me." He raised his bat and, as though swatting an insect, swung it over our heads.

"Listen you! No more hitting my son. Or else—"

"Or else what?"

"I'll see to it that you won't hit him again."

"Oh I'm so so scared."

"I'll talk to your parents."

He held out his bat to my father. "Stick this up you know where."

Instantly, father yanked the bat out of the other's hand and then dropped it to the ground. My tormentor blanched, then looked away. Did he see my father as some kind of nut you didn't mess with? He bent, retrieved the bat and, shaking his head as though perplexed,

moved off. I wanted to believe he had gotten the message that my father wasn't bluffing.

"Come," my father said, and we headed back to our apartment. "You tell me if he bothers you again" he said firmly. I interpreted this to mean that he again would come to my defense. It was the first time he had ever demonstrated that, in his own peculiar way, he cared for me.

* * *

Some weeks after the violent incident with the elderly customer, father was taken to the hospital. He had been there for a week, and all I had been told by my mother is that the doctors were trying to help him get well. But it was obvious that there was more to it than this transparently guarded explanation. How sick is he? I wondered. Dying? Could the doctors make him well? If not, and he dies, what will happen to mother, to my little brother and me? Other than my uncles,

mother's brothers, there was no one else to whom I might address these questions. Even so, I sensed that their responses would be no less guarded than mother's.

Since Father's hospitalization, our home life had been radically altered. Shortly after opening the store each morning, Mother would go by cab to the hospital and not return to our apartment until late at night. Before leaving for the store, she would make sandwiches for my brother and me and so whatever housework needed to be done. She largely left the operation of the store to the clerks, since I was hardly capable of managing the business in her absence. Didn't she worry that they, especially Jim, were probably stealing from the register? Well, now there was no one who could stop them.

My little brother and I were alone in the apartment much of the time. But we were not lonely—at least I wasn't. My brother would sit by the hour listening to silly radio shows that had been forbidden by our parents. Did Samuel have any idea of why our father was in the hospital? Probably not. Mother had admonished me not to share with him even the little information that she had imparted to me. Only eight years old, she cautioned.

As for myself, I felt wonderfully liberated. free of parental constraints. After school, I happily adventured in Chicago. The kaleidoscopic plumes of the Buckingham Fountain had never appeared more radiant. Exploring the dimly-lit cavernous streets underneath Michigan Boulevard and Wacker Drive, I would imagine myself moving through ancient catacombs. Shoeless on the sands of Oak Street Beach, I observed the revolving arc of the nearby Palmolive Peet Beacon. I steered ships that passed under the raised bridges of the Chicago River. From the Morrison Hotel's wire-enclosed rooftop, I would look down at the toy vehicles and cipher pedestrians in the Loop's streets far below.

Engaged in these adventures at a time when my father lay in a hospital, did I feel any guilt? Well, some. If father were to be apprised of my adventures in his absence, he would have cursed me. Why aren't you helping your mother in the store! Very likely, he would not be my only judge. When mother's brothers came by our apartment to pick her up for the trips to the hospital—she had never learned to drive—they seemed to look at me with unveiled disdain. When we were your age in Russia, I imagined them thinking, we were the main support for our parents . . . Still, my dear gentle grandfather did not judge me. He

would look at me with a concerned, sorrowful expression, as though thinking, My grandchild, what is to become of you?

This wanderjahre in the streets of Chicago went on for several days. Then one early evening my Uncle Sam phoned to say he was coming by our apartment to bring me to the hospital. He sounded grim. At once I became anxious. Why did I have to go there? Had my father really asked to see me, or was this something that my mother and uncles felt was necessary. But why now? Was he dying?

During the short ride to the hospital, my uncle hardly spoke. Looking back over the decades to that evening, I understand why he didn't. What could he have said? That your father was going to get well? For by then he must have known that the illness was terminal., He warned me that I would find my father's appearance greatly altered. "Be a man," he counseled. " He isn't going to die, is he?" I asked, hesitantly. He shrugged.

We entered the hospital—the first time I had ever been in any hospital as a visitor. Moving through corridors past rooms, I tried to imagine what was happening behind the closed doors. How could you tell which patients were dying? What should I say to father? What

would he want me to say? Would he jump on me for not helping out in the store? Why did I have to come here at all? Why couldn't they let me stay home?

My uncle stopped before a room. He knocked, opened the door and we went in.

He was sitting up in a bed, his head braced against a pillow. My mother was standing beside him, holding his hands. He was smiling at me. Yes, actually smiling! Was he really pleased that I was there? Or just pretending? His face, startlingly gaunt and yellowish, peered at me.

My mother's eyes were dark with sorrow. "Son, come kiss your father," she said.

"Let me see you, son." His voice didn't sound familiar, a stranger's voice. So weak—almost a whisper. Hesitant, I stepped over to the bed, bent and awkwardly kissed his cheek. The skin felt like cold putty. When I straightened up, he was still smiling. Mother gestured to me, and then she and I, from opposite sides of the bed, were holding his hands. They were thin, frail looking—not the powerful hands that had

beat me that day at the dunes. Now my hands were stronger than his. Much stronger.

I didn't know where my Uncle Sam was. Perhaps he had left the room.

What father said to me at first, I cannot entirely recall. Perhaps he inquired about my high school classes. Perhaps he wanted to know what I was reading. My responses to these queries must have been perfunctory—what I supposed he wanted to hear. Disturbed by his frailness, discomfited by his eyes on me, I remember thinking, How long do I have to be here?

Clearly, he did not want me to leave. His hand on mine tightened, as though he wanted to transmit a message. His mouth trembled, he struggled for breath. Then he gestured for me to come closer. I did, with partly closed eyes, as though to divert his gaze.

Then he said in a faint, reed-like voice, "Son, forgive me . . . I hit you . . . This was wrong . . . .So ashamed . . . . A father to do this to his son." He paused and then asked, in a tone of urgency, " Forgive me?" I nodded. What else could I have done?

My mother continued to hold his hand, but she had turned her face away from me. Was she about to cry?

"Son, you have a good heart, he said, almost whispering. I see the road ahead . . . You're going to be all right . . . Yes . . . Proud of you. . . . Very proud, my son." Then he fell into a silence, as though there was nothing further that needed to be said.

I heard my uncle's voice. He appeared at the foot of the bed and indicated it was time to go; my father needed to rest. Altogether, I must have been in the room no more than ten minutes.

When I started to leave, he did not let go of my hand. "Son," he said, in a suddenly urgent tone, "Take care of your mother." I understand now why he waited to say this to me at the end of the visit.

His hand lightly released mine. My uncle gestured for me to kiss him. I did, perfunctorily, and then we left. As the door was closing, I saw that mother was still holding his hand.

On the way to his car, my uncle was silent. I didn't know what would be safe to ask him. Maybe he himself didn't know then whether Father was going to live. Maybe the doctors didn't know either.

* * *

In the dark streets below the windows of my grandparents' second-floor apartment a dog was howling. Somewhere I had heard that a dog's howling at night could mean that someone you know is dying. Shut up! Shut up!

No walkers or cars moved in the streets. It was way past midnight. My mother and uncles had never been this long at the hospital. What was happening there? Dying?

I was alone in my grandparents' flat. Earlier I had been at home and asleep when my uncle Sam came by to bring me here. He had not come for my little brother—only seven years old, after all. But why my grandparents' place, since they, too, were at the hospital? Because it was only a short distance to the hospital instead of a much longer drive to our apartment on the Northwest side? But that could not be the only reason. Apparently it had been decided by my mother and uncles that I should be here when they returned from the hospital. Why? Because he already had died?

To shut out the howling, I went to the wind-up phonograph cabinet which stood in a corner of the dining room. This Victrola player

for me was the most important fixture in the modest two-bedroom flat. Customarily, within minutes of arriving there, I would remove a few worn records from the cabinet, crank up the phonograph, and place a record on the turntable. The conductor of a major symphonic orchestra, I would wave a baton, directing the musicians with precision and passion.

Now I chose a piece by one of my favorite composers, Tchaikowsky, because his music often was brooding, melancholy, and positioned it on the turntable. At once a screeching like a sick cat. Very likely the needle was defective. I looked at the little box which contained unused needles but, for whatever reason, it was empty. I closed the cabinet top.

What is keeping them?

I tried to picture my father dead. What did a dead person look like? Is there a smell? Are the eyes open or shut?.

Stop thinking like that! He's not going to die. If he does, who will support mother and us kids?

What is keeping them there so long?

At least the howling had stopped.

I returned to the living-room. Through one window I had a partial view of the little shul down the street where Zayde prayed. There, a few times a year (mainly for the High Holidays), I sat next to him. Hearing the recitations from the Torah scrolls, witnessing the swaying and bowing of the worshippers, mostly left me indifferent. As probably was the case for my father too. A Marxist and agnostic, he went to the shul only on the High Holidays, and this only out of respect for his father-in-law. (After all, they had shared a common history of persecution and flight from the Soviet Union and new immigrant struggles in America.) Also, I was there because my mother, Zayde's eldest daughter, insisted on my attendance, said it made her pious father happy when I sat beside him. Probably so, but Zayde was too perceptive to harbor any illusion that his grandson was drawn to becoming an observant Jew. Sitting through the service, I would be bored and wonder what was so special about being a Jew anyway. Still, though unable to grasp what it meant to him, I loved Zayde with all the ardor of a troubled adolescent for a loving, kind, non-judgmental man.

Turning away from the windows, I went into his bedroom. There, in a sparsely furnished room, on an end table beside his bed was the

familiar dish with the medicated powder for his severe asthma. I frequently observed him, a towel entirely covering his head, inhaling the fumes of the burning powder, wanting to breathe more freely.

It occurred to me that a comparatively short distance from this room my father might be on an operating table, trying to breathe through an oxygen mask. In the waiting room, Zayde would be praying for father, asking God for a successful operation. But maybe father wasn't on an operating table but in his hospital bed, and the doctors had informed my mother that he was going to die.

What's keeping them? It was so late—three a. m.

I went back to the living-room and stood before the windows, wanting to see my uncles' cars arrive. Nothing moved in the darkness below.

Now the damn howling began again. But maybe it didn't have anything to do with father. Maybe someone else in the neighborhood was dying.

Intending to be wide awake when the front door opened, I stretched out on the couch.

I must have been only partly awake when they came into the room. First my mother, then my uncles and my grandparents. At once I sat up abruptly, not wanting them to assume that while they had been at the hospital for hours I had been asleep on the couch.

Mother bent over me. "Son," she said quietly, and stopped. I knew from her eyes, from my uncles' faces, Bobeh's sobbing, from the way Zayde looked, knew before my mother could say it. "Son, your father has left us." Strangely, she was not crying. Why not? I wondered.

When I stood up, she drew me to her. I worried that she might start crying and if she did and I couldn't—unless I faked it—how this would make me look in front of the others? Anyway, the moment felt unreal, a little phony, as though she and I were expected to act out roles in a play. All I wanted was to get out of there quickly and go home.

"The doctors didn't know how to save him," she said bitterly. "They didn't know what it was, couldn't help him. He was in terrible pain. He screamed and screamed, so that I tried to close my eyes and ears. He said to me that he wanted to live only for the sake of his family." Her mouth tightened. I had never heard her voice sound so cold, frozen. "And now these doctors want me to let them do an

autopsy, to find out what it was. They say that maybe they could discover something that would help medical science to learn something that would save lives. But they couldn't help him when he was alive, so why should I let them cut him up into pieces? She paused, then asked, "What do you think, son?"

Despite her anger, I sensed what she really wanted me to say. "Idealistic for the sake of humanity" were words my father used when he spoke to us and to others about the Abraham Lincoln Brigade in Spain, the international Soviets, F. D. R. His face would be very animated then. "Let the doctors do it," I said. Then unexpectedly, strangely, I heard myself saying, as though the words weren't coming from inside me but from another person, "It's what Dad would want." Having said this left me feeling uneasy, and I retreated into silence.

Mother stepped back, as though to get a closer look at me. She kissed my forehead. "Bless you, son. Thank you my son." Turning to the others, gesturing with her hands, she said, "You see the kind of son I have. You see?" I welcomed her praise but continued to feel uneasy and hesitated to turn and observe how all this was affecting my relatives. Someone at the back of the room was sobbing, and I

recognized Bobbe's voice crying out something in Yiddish. Zayde? Maybe he was silently praying, maybe asking God to protect mother and us kids. Now mother asked her brothers to phone the doctors, to let them do the autopsy.

All the while, I didn't entirely believe he was dead. Maybe someone had made a terrible mistake and he was still breathing, still alive inside a room of shelves where, as I had seen in a movie, the dead are stored. Shouldn't someone try to find out if this was the case?

When it was time to leave, Uncle Sam, who would be driving us home, patted me on the back, as though I had done something special. Zayde went to the door with us, warmly kissed Mother, said a few words to her in Yiddish. Then his eyes looked into mine, as though to tell me something. About? Father? God? Heaven? I didn't know.

His eyes followed me out of the door, down the stairs, into the car and through the darkened streets of the West Side.

Daybreak emerged as we approached home. I wondered what mother would say to my kid brother, who was much too young to understand. Maybe she could just say that his father had gone on a long vacation.

* * *

There is not much more to relate. There was the burial and the shivah. And, decades later, a particular visit to the cemetery.

In the chapel I shouldn't have looked. But since everyone else in the line moving past the open casket did, I did, too. The hideous figure in the casket was my father! This puffy-faced bloated dummy smiling stupidly, the way he never did—when he smiled at all. But apparently mother, who was directly behind me in the line, believed it was father because she got down on both knees beside the casket and began wailing. "Chaim! Chaim!" It angered me that she was making such a scene. I couldn't stand the wailing and went off to a corridor outside the chapel, thinking to be less noticeable there. But relatives came by and babbled on about father. I didn't really listen. Did they wonder why I wasn't crying, showing some signs of grief? Were they thinking, What kind of a son is this?

I had never been to a cemetery. My mother, relatives and some strangers threw handfuls of dirt onto the casket after it had been lowered into a kind of ugly pit. Why dirt? Why not flowers, as I had

seen in films on burials? But no one explained this to me, and I wasn't interested enough to ask.

I was not sorry to leave the cemetery. All those tombstones gave me the creeps.

At the shivah in our apartment I was repelled by the way people stuffed their mouths with food. Another custom, I assumed, like the sitting without shoes and the covering of mirrors. What could be meaningful in all that? There was a lot of noisy gabbing, even some loud laughter, like you might hear at a party. If Zayde, who was home with a bad cold, could speak English, he probably could have explained the shivah tradition.

And Father? Hard to believe that no more would I see him come home looking worn out and cranky from a long day on his feet in the store, no more would he bring us to Grant Park for the summer night classical music concerts, no more would I see him bent over a book, reading into the night . . . .

* * *

Here it is again. This is where it all ends.

I am standing before the side-by-side gravestones of my parents. The other stones in this family plot are for my grandparents, aunts, uncles and my cousin Judy, who died a few years ago. Brought here from distant places in the United States, my relatives are together now in a circumscribed plot of earth. This Jewish cemetery is in Forest Park, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago.

Even though a few of my relatives still reside in the greater Chicago area, I am alone here—want it that way. My wife and children are at home on the West Coast, and the visit occurs on a one-day stopover in Chicago.

On this bright windless late fall afternoon the cemetery is especially peaceful. It wasn't always this way when my mother and I came here during the years following father's death in 1937; then there were many days of rainstorms, lightning, grey skies.

There they are.

Because of recurring anti-Semitic vandalism in the cemetery, there is on the gravestone above the inscription, AUGUST 8, 1891-MAY 30, 1993, no photo of mother to show her warm haimish face. But I do not require a photo to remember how for many years after father's death she sacrificed her young life to maintain a semblance of family for her two sons.

My dear dear mother. I was of little help to you during your dismal widowhood years.

The photo of father's face on the glazed coldness of the gravestone makes him appear startlingly handsome and intelligent. Well, he was both, wasn't he? I had forgotten that he had so full a crop of hair—yes, in contrast to the balding pate of the seventy-seven-year old man studying his photo. His eyes are piercing. Is he condemning me? Even now? I flinch, look away from the photo.

To one side of the plot is the tree, my old sturdy friend. At the unveiling of father's stone in 1938 it was only knee high; now it is twice my height. Many times, having complied with mother's plea to accompany her to the cemetery, I would lean against the trunk of this tree as a bulwark. Was it my hands on the bark that pulsed? Or

something in the tree? Whatever the explanation, it alone provided a center of calmness during my mother's predictable emotional outpourings. Sometimes the pulsing felt as though the tree might be trying to tell me something while she was prostrate on the ground before father's stone and talking to it. On those occasions, irritated by this naked display of grief, I was determined not to feel pity for her.

Into my late teens, I dreaded the periodic visits to the cemetery. It was over an hour away by lurching streetcars from our apartment in the Lawndale district of the West Side, to which we had moved after the sale of the Milwaukee Avenue store. During those rides I often would be nauseous and vomit. Sitting beside each other, mother and I usually would be silent. Perhaps she was worrying about the rapidly dwindling money from father's life insurance policy and about how to continue providing for my brother and me. I would be dreading the cemetery visit ahead, hoping it would be a short one so I could get home in time to play softball or touch football with my neighborhood pals.

Looking back, I acknowledge that her reluctance to go to the cemetery by herself was justifiable. It was a long walk from the end of the streetcar line and along a narrow dirt path to the cemetery gate.

There was little auto traffic on the road which ran alongside the cemetery and very few pedestrians on the path. Understandably, she was fearful that some creep might attack her if she was alone. Besides, to have refused to accompany her would have shamed me in the eyes of my relatives and, more important, Zayde.

Finally we would reach the main gate, pass through it and enter a landscape of gravestones, lot after lot, row upon row. On my own, I would have had difficulty in finding the site, but mother readily led the way to it . . . .

So, here I am again, several years after her burial. I place little stock in the existence of the supernatural, but in this moment I want to believe that, somehow, she— whatever and wherever "she" is—knows that I am here. Now, gazing at mother's stone, I begin talking to it.

"Mother, how miserable your life was after father's death. The long years you worked as a department store clerk. How you would come home exhausted from work and, without any help from your sons, would make our dinner, then do all of our laundry, all of the housework. For your thanks I sometimes would scream obscenities at you—and

once, to my shame, even threatened to hit you. Mother, I was unhappy, too—the three of us trapped in a miserable, chained existence.

So in my memory you are never laughing, And yet, your beloved niece, Sylvia, who occasionally visited you in St. Louis, where your lived in the late forties and fifties during your second marriage, recalls your laughter with pleasure. "Auntie threw her head back and just laughed with her body and her eyes—those eyes were so full of mirth. I can almost hear it now. It was a mischievous laugh as well, as though a bit of her said 'no laughing' and the rest said 'I must'. I remember her with such gratitude because of her help to me when Jon[her son] was an infant. He was born with a club foot and every two weeks I had to bring him to St. Louis to have casts removed from his legs. He was less than a year old and a handful on the bus. He and I went immediately to Bertha's house where Jon and I cleaned up and were fed. Auntie came with us to the Dr. and she schlepped baby paraphernalia. Then we went to the bus station and Auntie got home somehow. Every two weeks for several months and she was good natured and helpful and full of love for both of us. I literally could not have done it without her and I bless her to this day."

Mother laughing? I don't remember this at all. "So, apparently, there was much in you that I didn't perceive. Yet I was quick to rail against you for not standing up to father, for not protecting me from his rage.

"Mother, I should have neen a comfort to you, not made your widowhood even more miserable."

Suddenly, unexpectedly, I am weeping, weeping as I have not done for many many years, as I did not at father's burial or at the unveiling of his stone. Not even in her room at a Jewish home for the aged where mother resided with relative contentment for several years, and which I entered one hour after she had passed away.

Mother, at the end I wasn't there to hold your hand. Even then.

Then, hesitantly, I shift my attention back to father's photo. But this time I am not disconcerted by his eyes. "Father, what can I say here? Recite a litany of your strengths and faults? What you were and what you as a father should have been? Yes, all that was in you did not bloom—as it has not in me either. You were a victim of your age—of poverty and oppression in Russia, immigrant struggles in the New

World, the Depression, incarceration in the store. In the end, your cancer-ridden body betrayed you.

"Long after your death, Aunt Bella once told me that you were a warmly affectionate, extravagently generous person. And she also spoke of you as possessing a poetic sensibility. Perhaps all this is true. But why hadn't I personally witnessed these qualities? Where was I when they were manifest?

"Well, we are what we are. It's too late for inventories. Too late to dwell on what you or I should have been. I can never add it all up. So many years gone by . . . My anger over what happened between us has long since been burned out. So let it go, let it go . . . .

"Father, there is a photograph in my files—apparently the earliest photograph I have of the two of us. Probably the year is 1926 or 27. I am four or five. You are holding me in your arms. I am bundled up in a woolen cap, a thick woolen jacket and leggings. Probably it is winter in Chicago. As though for a special social occasion, you wear a dressy hat. My cheeks are plump. I appear neither happy nor sad. My impression is that you are holding me firmly, and I feel secure in your arms. But why then am I sharply turned away from you, as though

staring at something or someone beyond the photograph's frame? I don't know. Clearly, though, you are looking at me warmly, lovingly, as though I please you. Your smile suggests you are proud to be a father—proud to be my father. I treasure that photo."

It's time to leave, the sun is descending. I find a small round stone and gently place it between the two graves. Farewell mother, farewell father. I bid goodby, one by one, to my grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousin Judy. After which I go to the tree and embrace the trunk, feeling, as in earlier times, the pulsing. But now, in my twilight years, I doubt that this sensation is the sign of a revelation.

Then I leave the plot and walk slowly along the dirt path toward the exit and beyond. #